**Chapter 2 Skyholme**

After I was born, I was frustrated. My thoughts were slow and cloudy. I had my past knowledge, but it was hard to grasp and hold onto. It was like remembering the plot of a book you didn’t like from years ago. I also had to work hard at acting as baby-like as possible. Let’s just say I wasn’t a fan of soiling my diaper and crying when I was hungry.

When my eyes developed enough, I was able to see my family. My father, Caleb, was a solid man with above-average height and musculature, and I figured out he was a town or city guard by his dark gray uniform. He wore his black hair in a short ponytail, and his blue eyes seemed hard to me.

My mother, Alurha, was average looking but had amazing blue-green eyes, dark blonde hair, and a brilliant white smile. My mother was a leather engraver. She was an artist at cutting images into leather pieces. I also had an older brother, Pascal, who was about three years my senior.

I managed to comprehend the language fairly quickly as my brother was in the process of building his vocabulary, and I listened to his inquiries with intensity. I was named Storme. Apparently, I was born during a lightning storm while a flight of lightning drakes was attacking the island. I heard the story of my birth every time she introduced me.

I grew up soaking in everything I could. I quickly gained movement, crawling, then walking. I learned the language extremely quickly. I started talking around six months, and by six years old, I had a good handle on my new existence, and everyone commented what a bright boy I was. My biggest frustration was the foggy memories of my past life. My knowledge was incomplete and

I learned many things. Skyholme was comprised mainly of eight large floating islands. The largest was the central island, and that is where most of the nobility and high-born lived. The other seven islands each had their regional specialty as well. Our island trained soldiers, supplied armor and arms, and had a minor agricultural development focused on grains that produced bread and beer. Large airships and skyships transported people and goods between the islands.

What is the difference between an airship and a skyship? Well, a skyship relied entirely on magic to fly. An airship relied on some non-magical means to fly, but this didn’t preclude an airship from using magic as well. My father was a guard on a skyship transport but usually spent his day at our tiny local port checking passengers and goods. My best guess as to the population of the Skyholme people was a little over 3 million people. Our island, Titan’s Shield, had about 500,000 people scattered in four large cities and twenty-plus small towns. Our town was named Hen’s Hollow.

Magic was used to help expedite harvests in the fields, and our diets were supplemented with food from dungeons to support the large populations on the islands. Our island was the second most populous island after the central island, Skyhold, the capital. Our island exported soldiers, guards, explorers, adventurers, armor smiths, weapon smiths, and leather workers to the other islands and the outposts in the lands below. The lands below were also called the lowlands. Fields on our island also produced large amounts of grains for bread and ale. Although, my father frequently noted the quality of the bread and ale was below that of another island that focused just on agricultural goods. Our small town was over one mile outside one of the cities and had a single skyship dock where my father worked. Our town shipped mostly low-quality ale and passengers to the other islands and cities. My father was usually on duty in the dock doing inspections, but every 7th day he rode the skyship transport on a 16-hour loop for deliveries.

The history of the Skyholme empire was mostly told through song. Singing was a pastime everyone contributed to. The floating islands were once a single large island about 3000 years ago and were ruled by an arrogant avian race, the Haikarum. The large island had moved in a massive circular orbit over the lowlands, following a prominent aether ley line. An archmage from the Haikarum tried to draw the power of the ley line into the island, which caused the catastrophic shattering of the massive island. The remains of the civilization were rocked into disarray, and a group of adventuring humans in an old airship conquered the land. They killed the Haikarum without mercy. Of course, the songs that sang their deeds made them sound heroic.

The various islands still followed the same path today, but no magic could pull the islands back together. They were locked in their new orbits. The adventurers from the original airship soon started a settlement and that grew into the nation of Skyholme over a few hundred years.

At first, it had been just a base where the original crew of the airship based their adventures, but it quickly grew in population as the islands were relatively safe compared to the lowlands. They had a large influx of immigrants seeking security. The Skyholme of today now controlled the eight largest islands and a few of the smaller fractured islands. There were also a few dungeon entrances on the islands, which made them valuable sources of aether crystals to power magic items and the skyships. The dungeons also supplied various goods for commerce.

Politically the Skyholme Empire was currently ruled by the Triumvirate, the heads of the three prominent noble families. Each of these three families had dozens of members, but there was a maximum of 23 recognized in each true line of succession. Huh, the number 23 again. There were also 23 moons—essentially planets, that orbited inside the world sphere. Members that fell outside the 23 were demoted to minor nobles in the city.

The internal politics were supposedly brutal based on the adults’ conversations in my presence. Each family of the Triumvirate was in charge of one aspect of life in Skyholme; commerce, military, or citizenship. The commerce faction, currently the strongest faction, was involved in all aspects of harvesting, dungeon delving, manufacturing, and trade. They also controlled the Adventurers Guild and monitored dungeon divers on the islands and the dungeons in the lowlands. The military faction was focused on training the city guard, navy, and battle mages. They were responsible for raiding, defending, and guarding Skyholme. The citizenship faction was integral to maintaining the populace’s morale, education, religion oversight, acclimating immigrants, and being in charge of the rule of law.

Even though the Skyholme Empire was apparently xenophobic, they still had an interesting military unit that was surrounded by mystique. As best as I could figure from the stories and tales, they were a werewolf half-breed that looked more human than werewolf. Apparently, a wolf beastkin species lived in the lowlands in small villages, and the females were captured from the villages and enslaved. One of the neutral minor royal families specialized in capturing and breeding the beastkin females with a human male. The resulting offspring were sterile, long-lived, and had superior physical skills, but most importantly, they had a high degree of loyalty if raised in a structured system.

This elite unit guarded the Triumvirate palace where the three ruling families governed. The rumor was the head of each family had a total of 200 family Wolfguard they could assign to guard their residence or individuals within their family. Beyond these 600, there was The Blackguard, another unit of the Wolfguard that was assigned to the capital’s palace where the Triumvirate ruled. This special guard had over 2000 Wolfguard and was supposedly a neutral entity in regard to politics to keep peace among the three families.

Overall, the Wolfguard had very few mages, but those that did manifest an aether core were usually regulated as personal bodyguards to the elite nobles of the families. Since a Wolfguard lived around 250 years, they might serve across multiple generations. Outside of the three triumvirate noble lines, a Wolfguard could be bestowed on an individual only by a current member of the Triumvirate, and they had to pull them from one of their family limit of 200. Failed or mutilated Wolfguards were usually put down, but occasionally, you might see the fallen ones doing menial jobs in the capital.

I once saw a Wolfguard on Titan’s Shield when I was four years old and in the city with my father. He looked more human than wolfman but moved like an observant predator, and my blood chilled when he made eye contact with me. I later learned he was guarding a minor noble working for the military faction. They were visiting the local academy to select men and women to train in the naval academy on the capital island. This was typical. The central academies on the capital island were better funded and had quotas for the number of graduates. They filled out their class roles from the top students of lesser academies on the outer islands.

The academies were where every child went in their 14th year. There was a general academy that lasted just one year, and then you entered a seven-year specialized academy based on your results from your first year of the academy. You could also pass on entering the academy and enter an apprenticeship with a master. Our small town had a very small 1st-year general academy. It was an old unused barracks. When I entered at age 14, my class would have 11 teens from our town. One thing about this world was people matured faster physically. My best guess was that by age 15, the people were physically mature to about age 18 in my old world.

After you complete your seven-year academy training, you will be 22 and have completed internships and education to be a contributing member of society; sometimes, you will have some debt to pay off. Not so different than my past life.

Magic also played a significant role in which academy you went to. If you had magic, someone would sponsor you to attend a better academy. If you had magic, it would manifest with puberty, around age 12. I was looking forward to my coming of age, where I could start to access the magic and abilities I had selected. This would be between the ages of 12 and 13 when my hormones reached a certain level, and my aether core awakened.

I began playing regularly with children in my neighborhood at age 7. My best friend lived two houses down and was named Gareth. He was a few months younger than me but looked two years older. It was easy to tell he would be a very large man. With knowledge from my past life, I took advantage of my time with Gareth, forging a lifelong friendship.

Gareth and I delivered food, messages, and items in town to earn a few coins. Well, we made good money for kids and quickly became known in town for our speed and reliability. I also learned the currency. There was steel, copper, silver, gold, platinum, mithril, and adamantine coins. Each coin was the size of a penny, and 100 steel equaled 1 copper, 100 copper to 1 silver, 100 silver to 1 gold, 100 gold to 1 platinum, 10 platinum to 1 mithril, and 10 mithril to 1 adamantine.

Each denomination also had a 10-piece that was the size of a half-dollar coin from my prior life as well. A ten-piece was also called a ‘large coin’ for short. There were also bars that merchants used for larger denominations. Values supposedly closely followed the rarity they were found in the world sphere naturally, but I had my doubts. Well, for our delivery work, we started making 10 to 20 steel coins per delivery and, on good days, could pull in a few coppers each.

When Gareth and I reached our 10th birthday, we had more freedom, and we sometimes even had a delivery to the city, which was just over a mile away, and we earned a few coppers for the extra effort. We usually would spend half our income on food and drink to replenish our energy. Our one luxury item was a pair of fishing poles. The wide stream that was outside of town had a fair number of fish, and on a good afternoon, we could catch enough for our family with extra to sell to a food stall vendor in the city or at the local pub in Hen’s Hollow.

Gareth turned into a loyal companion, and we spent our mornings studying with a few local kids under Gareth’s mother, who was a scribe, learning letters and numbers. The days were spent running errands, and we got into trouble going on adventures in the evenings. It was a happy time for me, reliving my childhood. My older brother had his own crew, and they played at soldier, getting ready for the academy. I also now had a younger sister, Freya, three years my junior, who tried to tag along with Gareth and me. We allowed her to follow along on our deliveries and adventures as long as we were not going to the city.

I should take a moment to describe the World Sphere. The first odd thing was the day-night cycle. Days, as close as I could tell, were 23 hours long. Yes, the number 23 again. We had 13 hours of daylight, 9 hours of twilight split between morning and dusk, and one hour of semi-darkness. The central sun had some dark zones, which accounted for the changes in lighting based on its rotation. There were 23 also planets that rotated the sun as well. When a planet did eclipse the sun, it was usually marking a certain special event. There were 12 months, each with 35 days and a five-day holiday’ week’ not included in the months to celebrate the past year and the coming year. This made the entire year have 9,775 hours. On Earth, I had had 8,760 hours. So one year in the sphere was 42 days more than on Earth.

The second odd thing was the fog and haze. The mornings almost always had a few hours of mist, like we were stuck in a cloud. I assumed this had something to do with our altitude. The third thing about the World Sphere was the sky itself. It looked like a pastel painting of greens, blues, whites, browns, and yellows. It was definitely pretty amazing to gaze on, and I never got sick of looking at it, wondering about all the life and action happening in that marvelous prismatic sky. Not much was mentioned about life inside the crust of the world sphere in the stories I heard growing up. I heard a few stories about traders from the Dark World who lived outside the sphere. Most of the stories had to do with their strange mix of magic and technology.

The only respite I had from my childhood was the city’s bookstore. Every sixth or seventh day, I would make it to the city and borrow a book on magic theory for a week for a few hard-earned coppers. Developing a good enough relationship with the bookstore owner took me a while. It usually took a good portion of my funds to borrow books, as Gareth was saving his own funds for weapons and armor.

Without access to aether, I just read the theory and puzzle out basic spell forms. Magic itself was fairly rare. About 1 in 8 people had enough aptitude and a large enough aether core to learn and cast multiple spells. Abilities were much more common.

I knew I had a large aether reservoir in my future. In my readings, I found abilities were documented up to tier 3. Tier 4 abilities were considered rare, tier 5 was so rare if you manifested one, you were guaranteed marriage into a powerful triumvirate family, sometimes not by choice. Well, tier 6 had no recorded instances in the Skyholme Empire that I could find in my youth. Personally, I planned to keep all my abilities secret.

Spell books were very expensive, and I had my sights set on three tier 1 spells from my initial readings.

*Cleanliness*, remove all dirt from clothes, skin and hair

*Mend Flesh*, repair damaged tissue

*Obfuscate Abilities*, shield abilities from inspection abilities and spells

The first one was cheap for a spell book at seven gold and was considered a tier 1 spell, but it was very complicated. It was a common and channeled spell, meaning the amount of dirt removed and cleaning determined the total aether cost. The spellbook was the size of a magazine containing 20 thick canvas pages, but fortunately, the pages only had writing on one side.

The second spell, *mend flesh*, was a tier 1 healing spell as well, but the spell book was 34 gold, the book typically had 35 pages. In the final spell, I only found references in my readings, and I figured I would have to obtain it on the capital island. It was a passive spell that required a constant minor expense of aether. It would end if you lost focus by sleeping or getting knocked out. There was no cost listed for the spell in the store catalog, but I guessed it would be over 100 gold. This was more because of government control than the spell being rare.

I also learned from my books, that my assess person ability was highly sought-after. I could live an easy life working for a royal family just using that tier 1 ability as it gave a person’s true name. Each assessment ability was slightly different. It could give the name, age, sex, race, and relative state of health, or some other similar scope of knowledge of the inspected person. I would have to wait to see what my ability did.

My aether core formed a few days after my 12th birthday, and my magic finally emerged. I awoke sweaty and feverish. It seemed I immediately vomited the contents of my stomach and the previous week’s worth of meals. Or at least that is what it felt like to me. I wanted to keep my core secret, so I suffered alone for hours. Like a second heart, I could feel the core when my body acclimated. Instead of circulating blood to my body, it circulated aether. I was one step closer to living in luxury.